

Why Israel Matters

Learn why Israel's peace affects YOU



Why does Israel matter?

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The State of Israel ranks 154th among the world's nations in land size. Thirty-two Israels would fit in the state of Texas. The country ranks 97th in population, comprising 0.2 percent of humanity. And yet this tiny nation makes global headlines daily.

Rev. Jerry Falwell made the now-famous claim that "God judges nations as they judge Israel." Fifty-two percent of Americans believe that the existence of the modern state of Israel is a direct fulfillment of biblical prophecy. After Israel was created in 1948, best-selling authors such as Hal Lindsey and Tim LaHaye announced that the "end times" had come and concluded that this is the final generation.

Why does Israel matter? Why is this nation such a fulcrum on which the lever of history moves?

According to Osama bin Laden, the 9-11 terrorists attacked our nation because we support the State of Israel.¹ The Israeli-Palestinian conflict inflames Muslims the world over, as demonstrated most recently by the Hamas-Israel skirmish last November. The United States spends \$3.1 billion a year supporting Israel. Is our commitment to this tiny nation worth its cost?

I recently returned from another trip to the Holy Land. I lead spiritual pilgrimages to this land every year, and am struck each time by its tiny size and global significance. Who and what is Israel? Why does she matter to America, to the world, and to our future?

Twenty centuries in 20 minutes

Today the world Jewish population numbers 13.75 million: 5.46 million live in the United States, 5.97 million live in Israel, and the remainder are scattered across the world. Most living outside Israel are "Ashkenazim," descendants of Jewish communities in central and Eastern Europe. Others are "Sephardim," descendants of Jews from Spain, Portugal, other Mediterranean countries, and the Middle East.

Let's begin with a brief history of this ancient people and their land. While this subject deserves the thousands of volumes that have been written on it, we will confine ourselves to a practical overview, identifying what we need to know to understand the significance of Israel today.

The "father of the Jews"

Our story begins with a shepherd who would be an Iraqi if he were alive today. After Noah's Flood (Genesis 6-9), his three sons began to repopulate the world. One of them

was named Shem (Gen. 11:10); the "Semitic" people take their name from his. His great-grandson Eber (v. 14) would lend his name to the "Hebrews." Six generations later we meet "Abram" (v. 26).

Abram and his father's family originated in Ur of the Chaldees, a city located in the southeastern region of modern-day Iraq (v. 31). After his father's death, Abram heard the Lord say, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you" (Gen. 12:1). Then God made a promise that has forged the character and courage of Abram's descendants ever since:

I will make you into a great nation
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you (Gen. 12:2-3).

Abram made his way to "Canaan" (v. 5), where he heard God say, "To your offspring I will give this land" (v. 7). This would become the "Holy Land" claimed by Israel as her inheritance from God.

In time God would promise Abram an offspring as numerous as the stars (Gen. 15:5). However, Abram and his wife Sarai were childless, so she gave him Hagar, her maid, to be a surrogate mother. She and Abram produced Ishmael (Gen. 16), from whom the Arab people trace their descent. God soon changed Abram's name to "Abraham," meaning "father of many nations" (Gen. 17:5). Abraham and his wife were enabled by God to conceive and produced their son Isaac (Gen. 21:1-7), from whom the Jewish people trace their ancestry. And so Abraham serves as the "father" of both the Jewish and Arab races.

The "twelve tribes of Israel"

When Isaac was a young boy, God called Abraham to offer him as a sacrifice on Mt. Moriah (Gen. 22:1-10). When Abraham complied, God stopped his knife and provided a sacrifice in place of the boy (vs. 11-13), thus ending the ritual of child sacrifice common in that day. (As we will observe later, that mountain would become the location of the Jewish temple. Roman armies destroyed the temple in A.D. 70; the Muslim Dome of the Rock stands over the site now.)

Isaac's son "Jacob" ("thief" or "supplanter") met God in a dramatic encounter and was renamed "Israel" ("he who wrestles with God"; Gen. 32:28). His 12 sons produced descendants who would become the "twelve tribes of Israel." Jacob's 11th son, Joseph, was sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt. There he rose to second-in-command and brought his family to live.

Their nation was eventually enslaved by the Egyptians. Four centuries later, Moses led the Jewish people through the Red Sea and wilderness to the edge of the land promised to Abraham's descendants. Joshua led the people through the flooded Jordan River and into the land of Canaan, where they conquered the inhabitants and established their nation.

Around 1050 B.C., the Jews crowned Saul as their first king. He was succeeded by King David, who conquered the capitol of the Jebusites atop Mt. Zion and made it his capitol city, Jerusalem. "Zion" would come to signify the Jewish nation as "Washington" signifies America.

His son Solomon built the first Jewish temple atop the adjacent mountain of Moriah, where Abraham had offered Isaac a thousand years earlier (marking the "First Temple" period). In 922 B.C., the twelve tribes split into two nations, the Northern Kingdom of Israel (the 10 northern tribes) and the Southern Kingdom of Judah (the tribes of Judah and Benjamin). The Assyrian Empire (roughly Syria and northern Iraq) conquered the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C. and assimilated its people; we refer to them as the "ten lost tribes of Israel." The Babylonian Empire (roughly Iraq) conquered the Southern Kingdom in 586 B.C. and destroyed Solomon's temple.

From Persia to England

After the Persian Empire (roughly Iran) overturned the Babylonians, their ruler Cyrus the Great allowed the Jewish people to return to their homeland under Persian dominance. There they began reconstruction of their temple (marking the "Second Temple" period). The Old Testament closes with the Persians in control of a struggling Jewish nation.

Between Malachi and Matthew, the Greek Empire rose to prominence and sought to force Israel to adopt Greek customs and gods. The Jewish people rebelled in 167 B.C. under the Maccabeans and established their independent nation again. By this time the Roman Empire had supplanted the Greeks as the dominant superpower; in 63 B.C. they conquered Jerusalem and subjugated Israel. Thus when the New Testament opens, the Roman Emperor is ruler of Israel through his appointee, King Herod.

The Jews rebelled against their Roman masters in A.D. 66. The Roman general Titus put down the rebellion and destroyed the Second Temple in A.D. 70. When the Jews revolted again in 132, Emperor Hadrian quashed their armies and scattered the people. He also renamed their land "Palestine" (the Latin version of "Philistine," the sea peoples that inhabited the Mediterranean coastal plain of the nation). Until 1948, the Holy Land would be known as Palestine and its inhabitants as Palestinians.

In A.D. 312, the Roman emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and legalized his new religion the next year. Thus begins the "Byzantine" or "Christian" era in Israel. In 637, the Arab Muslim advance conquered Jerusalem and Israel. The Muslim era continued until the Crusaders "liberated" and ruled the land from 1095-1291.

Egyptian Mamluks drove the Crusaders from Palestine and controlled the land until the Ottoman Turks gained control in 1517. The Ottoman Empire dominated Palestine until it was defeated in the World War I. In 1917, the British Empire was given control of Palestine, beginning the "British Mandate" period. The British left Palestine in 1947; on May 14, 1948, the modern State of Israel was born.

The Muslim version

Muslims tell the story very differently. They believe that Abraham offered not Isaac but Ishmael to God, making the Arab nation God's "chosen people," not the Jews. Some of them believe that this sacrifice occurred atop Mt. Moriah, though the majority claim that it was made on Mt. Mina near Mecca.

They also believe that Muhammad was taken from Mt. Moriah to heaven and returned to Mecca the same night, making the rock atop this mountain their third-holiest site (after Mecca, the birthplace of the Prophet, and Medina, where he died). They completed the Dome of the Rock in A.D. 691 as a shrine over this sacred location.

The Arab Muslim residents of Palestine who were displaced by the creation of Israel in 1948 still claim the land as their own. As we will see, some believe that Israel should be driven from the region and the entire land reclaimed for a modern nation of "Palestine." Others seek a "two-state solution" whereby Israel would keep some of the land and Palestine the rest. We will explore these controversial issues next.

A scorecard for the Middle East

Nearly every day we read news stories regarding the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, Fatah, Hezbollah, and Iran. Who are these groups? What do they want? Why do they matter to America and our future?

Palestine

As we have seen, "Palestine" (the Latin version of "Philistine") is the name given by Emperor Hadrian to the land of Israel after the 132-35 revolt. It remained the name of the land until the modern State of Israel was created in 1948. How did that State come to be?

There has always been a significant Jewish presence in the Holy Land. It is simply untrue that the Jews all left after the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70 and their nation was dissolved by Hadrian in A.D. 135. While many (known as "Diaspora" Jews) left the region, many others stayed in the land.

In the late 19th century, Theodor Herzl (1860-1904) and other Jewish leaders began a movement called "Zionism." Named for Mt. Zion, the location of David's Jerusalem, it argued that the Jewish people needed and deserved a homeland of their own. Their work encouraged many Diaspora Israelis to emigrate to the Holy Land over the coming decades.

Their movement was especially influential in Great Britain, so that it was often called "British Zionism." After the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in 1917, Britain was given control of Palestine, leading to the "British Mandate" period. British leaders eventually proposed a "two-state" solution to the United Nations (called the U.N. Partition Plan), creating a Palestinian state in part of the land while recognizing a sovereign State of Israel in the rest. Their proposal was accepted by Jewish leaders, but it was rejected by Arab leaders. The British then withdrew and Jewish authorities, led by David ben Gurion, announced the formation of the State of Israel on May 14, 1948.

The areas that would have created a Palestinian nation are called the "West Bank" and "Gaza Strip." The West Bank covers 2,177 square miles, an area slightly smaller than Delaware. Its name derives from its location on the western bank of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea; its population exceeds 2.5 million people. Gaza is an area 25 miles long and 4 to 7.5 miles wide, with a population of 1.6 million people.

In 1948, the Jewish War for Independence secured the region that would have been the State of Israel if the U.N. Partition Plan had been accepted. The West Bank remained under the control of Jordan, the Gaza area under Egypt. The 1956 Israel-Egypt conflict led to Israel control of the Sinai Peninsula. In 1967, the so-called "Six Days War" gave Israel control of both of these areas, as well as the "Golan Heights," a strategic area of high elevation on the border between Israel and Syria. The 1973 Yom Kippur War ended with Israel's victory and continued control of these areas.

In 1978, Israel signed the Camp David accords, creating a peace treaty with Egypt in exchange for returning the Sinai to Egyptian control. In 1993, the Oslo accords produced a treaty with the Palestinian Authority whereby Palestinian leaders recognized Israel's right to exist and Israel gave limited autonomy over Gaza and the West Bank to Palestinian control. The Golan Heights remain in Israeli control. Syria has made their return a pre-condition for peace with Israel.

The beliefs of radical Muslims²

To understand those who continue to oppose Israel, we need to know something of the worldview that motivates them. Islam (meaning "submission" or "peace") was founded by the Prophet Muhammad (570-632). Its "five pillars" are affirmed by 1.6 billion Muslims around the world:

- The creed: "There is no God but God, and Muhammad is his prophet"
- The prayers: five times a day, facing Mecca
- The *hajj*: pilgrimage to Mecca (birthplace of the Prophet), to be made by every Muslim
- The fast: during the month of Ramadan, nothing is consumed from sunrise to sunset
- The poor: alms given to those in need, typically constituting 2.5 percent of one's goods.

In addition to these tenets, "radical" Muslims affirm two additional convictions. One: the West has been attacking Islam since the Crusades and especially by supporting Israel. As we have seen, Muslims believe that Ishmael's children, the Arabs, are the true "chosen people." Most believe that the creation of Israel in 1948 was a theft of land from its rightful Muslim owners. They view America's support for Israel as complicity in this attack on Islam. Since the Qur'an requires Muslims to defend Islam (cf. Sura 2:190-192), they believe they are required to attack us to defend their faith.

Two: there are no innocents in the West. Because our culture is dominated by democracies, where citizens elect their leaders and support their military, we are all complicit in this perceived aggression against the Muslim world. Radical Muslims view the typical American the way we would view a German who supported Hitler.

As a result, in the mind of radical Muslims, 9/11 was not an unprovoked attack on innocent Americans. Rather, it was a defense of Islam that struck at the heart of Western, "Crusader," imperialistic society. The Twin Towers represented the financial power of this empire, the Pentagon symbolized the military, and the White House (the apparent target of the hijackers who were forced down in Pennsylvania), the political.

How many Muslims hold these two "radical" tenets? According to Gallup polls, approximately seven percent. The percentage would be much lower in America, but much higher in Yemen. This seems to be a small threat until we realize that seven percent of 1.6 billion people is 112 million jihadists who believe that killing us is a defense of Islam required by the Qur'an. This number is three times the enemy we faced in World War II and the Cold War, combined.

A short history of radical Islam

In the early 18th century, a reformer in the Arabian Peninsula named Muhammad ibn abd al-Wahhab rose to prominence. He taught his followers that the Western world had been oppressing Islam since the Crusades and must be opposed. He sought to lead Islam back to the purity of its founding era.

His followers, called "Wahhabi Muslims," embrace a very strict, anti-Western, legalistic version of Islam. Over time they became aligned with the House of Saud, which created the modern nation of Saudi Arabia in 1932. In return for their loyalty, the Saudi royal family decreed that Wahhabi Islam would be the official form of Islam in their nation and gave them control of the educational system in the country.

The Saudi royal family is very unpopular with the Wahhabis in their nation, routinely criticized for corruption and anti-Muslim character. To placate the people, these rulers have spent more than \$2 billion exporting Wahhabi Islam around the world, primarily through madrassas (schools of learning). Not all madrassas are radicalized, of course, but many are.

Wahhabi Islam is the historic source of "radical Islam" around the world. It has birthed much of the rhetoric that motivates jihadists today. Fifteen of the 19 9/11 terrorists were Wahhabi Muslims.

The Muslim Brotherhood

In 1928, an offshoot of Wahhabi Islam called the Muslim Brotherhood was founded in Egypt by Hassan al-Banna. Considered "the mother of all Islamist movements,"³ its creed is clear: "Allah is our objective. The Prophet is our leader. Qur'an is our law. Jihad is our way. Dying in the way of Allah is our highest hope."

The Brotherhood produced Ayman al-Zawahiri, the eye surgeon who is now leader of al-Qaeda. It birthed Sayyid Qutb, the scholar whose writings inspired Osama bin Laden and radical Muslims around the world. Its members assassinated Anwar el-Sadat for negotiating a peace treaty with Israel.

After the fall of Hosni Mubarak in 2011, Brotherhood candidates received the majority of votes cast in Egyptian elections. Their leader, Dr. Mohamed Morsi, is now president of Egypt. He grew up in Egypt, where he received two degrees in engineering. He then earned his Ph.D. in engineering from the University of Southern California and taught at California State University. In 1985 he returned to Egypt to teach there.

In 2011 he became president of the Muslim Brotherhood's political party. Last June 24 he was announced the winner of the Egyptian presidential election with 51.73 percent of the vote. In his victory speech he stated that he would honor all of Egypt's international treaties, including those with Israel. He has vowed to stand for democracy and women's rights. However, he has also branded Israel leaders "vampires" and "killers," and warned that all non-Muslims in Egypt will be forced to convert, leave the country, or pay a tax to remain.

Egypt controls the Suez Canal and oil shipments to the West. It has also been a significant energy supplier to Israel. Israeli leaders are now greatly concerned about the future of their nation's relationship with Egypt.

Fatah and Hamas

"Fatah" is an acronym for "Palestinian National Liberation Movement." The political party was founded in 1959 by Yasser Arafat, who led the group until his death in 2004. It is currently led by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

"Hamas" ("fervor") is an acronym (spelled backwards) for "Islamic Resistance Movement." It was established by Sheikh Ahmed Yassin in the late 1960s as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood. In 1973 he established the "Islamic Center" to coordinate the Brotherhood's activities in Gaza, and founded Hamas as their political arm in 1987. Its official charter, adopted in 1988, calls for the destruction of Israel and raising "the banner of Allah over every inch of Palestine."

Their leader, Khaled Meshal, has declared: "Palestine is ours from the river to the sea and from the south to the north. There will be no concession on an inch of the land. We will never recognize the legitimacy of the Israeli occupation and therefore there is no legitimacy for Israel, no matter how long it will take."⁴

For much of its history, the military wing of Hamas (*Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigade*) has sponsored terrorism against Israel. It has launched rocket attacks at Israeli towns and sponsored suicide bombers before Israel built a "security fence" around its borders. The Brigade claims more than a thousand members and is believed to have killed more than 500 people.

Hamas has also engaged in political and social work, funding clinics, schools, mosques, sports leagues, and orphanages. More than 90 percent of its work is educational, social, and cultural. In 2006 it won parliamentary elections in Gaza, defeating Fatah in the region. Fatah still governs the West Bank, however, so the Palestinian people have had no unified government or advocate since that time.

The two parties have pledged cooperation and mutual elections in the future. If Fatah (which recognizes Israel's right to exist) prevails, the peace process could move forward. If Hamas (which is pledged to Israel's destruction) gains control, it is difficult to see a way toward a "two-state" solution.

Hezbollah

Israel is bordered by the Muslim Brotherhood to its south, Hamas to the southwest, and Fatah to the east. On its northern border lies Lebanon, now dominated by Hezbollah ("Party of God"). The group was founded in 1982 by Sheikh Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, and has been sponsored by Iran and Syria across its history. Hassan Nasrallah is its senior political leader; Najib Miqati, recently elected prime minister of Lebanon, was chosen by Hezbollah for this post.

The organization is a major provider of agricultural services, schools, hospitals, and social services for the people of Lebanon. However, its militant wing has been defined by the United States as a terrorist organization.

The year after its founding, the group launched a truck bombing on the U.S. Marine barracks in Lebanon, murdering more than 200 soldiers. In 1992 it bombed the Israeli embassy in Argentina, killing 29; it bombed a Jewish community center in 1994, killing 95. Periodic border skirmishes and shelling escalated into full-scale war with Israel in the summer of 2006. A United Nations-brokered peace agreement ended the conflict, but tensions in the area remain high.

When I was in Israel, I met officials and influencers who assume that another war with Hezbollah and Lebanon is inevitable.

Iran

Of all the nations that threaten Israel's security, none is as significant or dangerous as Iran. The Islamic Republic of Iran, founded in 1979 by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, is currently led by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (the successor to Khomeini) and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

The latter has made world headlines by calling the Holocaust a "myth" and describing Israel as "filthy bacteria" and "the most criminal people in the world." He tells his people that "the United States and the Zionist regime [Israel] are their main enemies" and promises that "this regime will soon be swept away."⁵

The leaders of Iran are especially a threat to Israel for two reasons. One concerns their theology. They are waiting for the "Mahdi," a Messiah-like figure whom they believe will return to Earth one day to dominate the world for Islam. They tell their people that the Mahdi will not come again until Islam destroys Israel. If they attack Israel and the West, the Mahdi would then reappear to protect them from retribution.

Shortly after his election, President Ahmadinejad declared that Israel must be "wiped off the map."⁶ The next year, he stated that "the Zionist regime of Israel is like a rotten, dried tree that will be annihilated by one storm. Like it or not, the Zionist regime is headed toward annihilation."⁷

The second reason Iran constitutes "a threat to world peace," to use Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's phrase, is its nuclear ambitions.⁸ Shortly after assuming office, Ahmadinejad revived his nation's long-dormant nuclear program. In February 2010 he announced that Iran would begin enriching uranium. That month, U.N. inspectors determined that his government had been working to develop a nuclear warhead. The next year, inspectors claimed to possess evidence that Iran was working on technology that could be used for only one purpose: to set off a nuclear weapon. Iran's Shahab-3 missile has been used in parades draped with banners reading, "Wipe Israel off the map."⁹

Should Israel attack Iran?

Elliot Abrams, U.S. deputy national security advisor from 2005 to 2009, believes that it should.¹⁰ He cites Iranian leaders' continued calls for the destruction of Israel. One Iranian military strategist recently noted that Iran could kill 60 percent of the Jewish population in Israel by targeting Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa with its Shahab-3 ballistic missiles.

If Iran obtained nuclear weapons, how much more aggressive would it become? Would such capacity embolden Hamas, Hezbollah, and other terrorist groups? Could Iran bring life in Israel to a standstill by launching a missile or plane that might be a nuclear attack? Would Iranian nuclear weapons spark a nuclear arms race in the Middle East, with unpredictable consequences?

In Abrams' view, any setback to Iran's nuclear program would be welcome, even if an attack did not destroy that program completely. He believes that Iranian proxies would not necessarily attack Israel, knowing that they would be met with overwhelming force. And he worries that delaying military action while waiting for sanctions to contain Iran's nuclear threat only gives Tehran more time to build and secure its nuclear resources.

Robert Wexler, a former seven-term Democratic congressman from Florida, counters that "an attack might be necessary, but not yet."¹¹ He believes that economic sanctions are crippling the Iranian economy and stoking fires of resistance within the nation. He worries about attacks on Israel from terrorist groups and economic fallout from threats to the global oil supply. And he cites Israel's "deep preference for an American-led strike" rather than one initiated by Israel.

Both men agree that America should clearly state our intention to use military force to stop Iran's nuclear program. According to Wexler, "What is needed is an ironclad American assurance that if Israel refrains from acting in its own window of opportunity—and all other options have failed to halt Tehran's nuclear quest—Washington will act to prevent a nuclear Iran while it is still within its power to do so."

Abrams cites the Carter Doctrine, announced in 1980, that "an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force." He notes that "no president has said anything like that regarding Iran's nukes."

Israel and the "end times"

In the church where I became a Christian as a teenager, the "rapture," seven-year "Great Tribulation" and thousand-year reign of Christ on earth were accepted doctrine on a par with the virgin birth and bodily resurrection of Jesus. The modern State of Israel was viewed as fulfilling biblical prophecy and ushering in the "end times."

When I was a senior in college, I was assigned a paper on interpretive approaches to the book of Revelation. I was shocked to discover that at least nine different views on Revelation have been held by conservative biblical scholars. Only the last believes that Israel today is a fulfillment of biblical prophecies.

Views on the Book of Revelation

Here are representative approaches to Revelation and the "end times," with very brief explanations:¹²

- The "preterist" views Revelation as a first-century book with 21st-century applications but no predictive elements. This position is held by a high percentage of scholars today.

- The "continuous historical" view takes the opposite approach: Revelation forecasts the entire history of the church. For instance, one interpreter claims that Revelation 8:8-9 was fulfilled when the Vandals invaded Rome in 428-468.¹³
- Those who follow the "theological principles" approach view Revelation as a religious philosophy of life. To them, the book shows us how things turn out in a world where evil seems to be in control but God is actually King.
- The "social interpretation" school believes that Revelation teaches a particular social agenda, in which God's Kingdom overcomes the existing hostile, godless powers.
- "Postmillennialism" was very popular among evangelicals at the turn of the 20th century. It teaches that Jesus will return after the Church ushers in the "millennium" (cf. Rev. 20:1-6) through its Kingdom ministries.
- "Amillennialism" became popular in the mid-20th century. It teaches that the prophecies of Revelation are highly symbolic and move in parallel with each other.
- "Historic Premillennialism" expects a literal 1000-year reign of Christ on earth, but does not expect a "rapture" or "Great Tribulation." This was the view of a majority of scholars when I taught on the faculty of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in the 1980s.
- "Apocalypticism" views *Revelation* as intentionally symbolic rather than literal and does not expect a "rapture," "Great Tribulation" or literal millennium.
- "Dispensational Premillennialism" takes a literal approach to Revelation wherever possible, separates Israel from the Church, and teaches a "rapture" of the Church, seven-year Great Tribulation, and 1000-reign of Christ on earth. This position is most popular with Bible churches and many evangelicals today.

Note that the first eight approaches, while differing on many key issues, are united in their belief that there will be no "rapture" or Great Tribulation. They do not view the creation of the modern State of Israel as fulfillment of biblical prophecy.

Why do dispensationalists view Israel as they do? They cite God's promise to Abraham to "give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates" (Genesis 15:18). It was promised to Isaac (Gen. 26:2-5), Jacob (Gen. 28:13; 35:12), and his 12 sons and their descendants (Exodus 33:1-3).

They also cite Joshua 14:9, "the land on which your feet have walked will be your inheritance and that of your children forever." (However, note that this statement was made by Caleb regarding Hebron, his specific inheritance; it later fell to the Babylonians before being restored after the Exile. Today it is part of the West Bank and would belong to Palestine if a two-state solution were achieved.)

Other promises they believe were fulfilled by the creation of Israel in 1948:

- "All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever" (Gen. 13:15).

- "I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God" (Gen. 17:7-8).
- God promised regarding King David, "I will maintain my love to him forever, and my covenant with him will never fail. I will establish his line forever, his throne as long as the heavens endure. . . . his line will continue forever and his throne endure before me like the sun; it will be established forever like the moon, the faithful witness in the sky" (Psalm 89:28-29, 36-37).

On the last reference, note that most Jews (excepting Kohanim or Levites) can no longer trace their tribal ancestry. Some ask how a Jew would know that he or she was in the "line" of David today.¹⁴

Ezekiel 38-39 is a significant text in this conversation. Here the Lord warns that an enemy called "Magog," together with armies from the "far north," will invade Israel (Ezek. 38:2, 6; 39:2), but it will be defeated by God. He will bring his people back from exile and gather them from the countries of their enemies (39:25-27), promising to "gather them to their own land, not leaving any behind" (v. 28). Most dispensationalists believe this promise to be fulfilled by the creation of Israel in 1948 and expect an "end times" assault on the nation. Most non-dispensationalists view this text as fulfilled by the Jews' return to their homeland under the Persians (cf. Ezra 1).

Most dispensationalists agree that God judges nations as they judge Israel, citing God's statement to Abraham: "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse" (Genesis 12:3). For instance, according to David Jeremiah, "It is no surprise that one can begin charting the decline of the British Empire during the same years that they were reneging on their promise of a Jewish homeland for Israel."¹⁵

Those who disagree with dispensationalists regarding Israel typically follow one of three approaches. "Covenant" theologians believe that the Jewish people, by rejecting Jesus as their Messiah, violated their covenant with God and thus lost their nation. "Replacement" theologians view the Church as the fulfillment and replacement of Israel in God's plan. "Salvation history" theologians see God's work as beginning with the Jews and continuing through the Church, though many believe that the Lord is still using the Jewish people in a special way to bless all nations (Gen. 12:3).

As an example of the debate, consider Jeremiah 31:36: "Only if these decrees vanish from my sight," declares the Lord, "will the descendants of Israel ever cease to be a nation before me." Who are these "descendants"? Dispensationalists apply this promise to the Jewish race and modern state of Israel. Those who disagree note that God's "descendants" were those who have his law in their minds and on their hearts (v. 33). The Lord said they would "know me" (v. 34) in response to a "new covenant" (v. 31). Non-dispensationalists view these "descendants" as those who have made Jesus their Messiah and Lord, whether they are Jews or Gentiles.

A key text in the discussion is Paul's statement to the Galatians:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:26-29).

Are these the "end times"?

Recent years have seen hurricanes and earthquakes in America, tsunamis in Japan and Asia, global economic distress, and mass murders of students and children. In the face of such tragedies, many people are beginning to ask if these are the "end times." What did Jesus predict? Are his prophecies coming to fulfillment in our day?

Let's go back 20 centuries to Tuesday of Holy Week. After Jesus predicted the destruction of Herod's massive temple (Matthew 24:1-2), his disciples asked him, "what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (v. 3). Jesus responded with six "signs," each of which has been fulfilled to a remarkable degree in the last century:

- False religions would "deceive many" (v. 5). The 20th century witnessed a significant rise in the popularity of world religions and alternative spiritualities.
- "You will hear of wars and rumors of wars" (v. 6). More than 39 million people died in World War I, 51 million in World War II, and 16 million in the 150 wars since. The 20th century was the bloodiest in history.
- "There will be famines" (v. 7). More than 70 million people died in famines during the 20th century, the most ever.
- "There will be earthquakes" (v. 7). The National Earthquake Information Center tells us that the number of quakes is not increasing today, but they are far more catastrophic as populations in earthquake zones escalate.
- "You will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death" (v. 9). More than 25 million Christians died for their faith in the first 19 centuries after Christ; more than 45 million have died for Jesus in the 20th century.
- "This gospel of the kingdom must be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (v. 14). Communication technology will soon make it possible to reach the entire planet's population with the gospel.

Do these facts indicate that we are in the "end times"? Yes and no.

Jesus was clear: "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (v. 36). No human should claim to know more than Jesus. The Lord could delay his return by a decade, a century, or a millennium. At the same time, Jesus taught us to be prepared for him to return today: "keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come" (Matthew 24:42). We are one day closer to eternity than ever before in human history.

In biblical terms, we have been living in the "last days" for 20 centuries. According to the Jewish worldview, the "former days" would precede the Messiah; the "last days" would follow his ministry on earth. And so John could write, "Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour" (1 John 2:18).

For 20 centuries, Christians have been awaiting our Lord's return. If we live each day as though it were our last, one day we'll be right. And each day we'll make Jesus our Lord and King.

Seven reasons to support Israel

In 1808, former president John Adams wrote a letter to a friend in which he stated,

I will insist the Hebrews have [contributed] more to civilize men than any other nation. If I was an atheist and believed in blind eternal fate, I should still believe that fate had ordained the Jews to be the most essential instrument for civilizing the nations. . . . They have given religion to three-quarters of the globe and have influenced the affairs of mankind more and more happily than any other nation, ancient or modern.¹⁶

Was he right?

In my recent study tour of Israel, we visited the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem. There we entered the "Children's Memorial," where a single candle is reflected thousands of times by mirrors in a round structure while the names of 1.5 million children murdered during the Holocaust are read. It is always my most moving experience in Israel.

Next we turned to the larger museum, which tells the story of anti-Semitism across the ages, culminating in the rise of Nazism and the annihilation of six million Jews. Each time I visit, I leave with a renewed admiration of the Jewish people and their remarkable courage and character.

Abandoned and isolated, they forged a nation in a land surrounded by enemies devoted to their destruction. Fighting against armies with vastly larger numbers and resources, they have defended their nation time and time again. The people of Israel are among the most courageous I have ever known. However we view them through the lens of biblical prophecy, they matter to America and the West for at least seven reasons.

First, ***Israel has a historic right to the land.*** Jewish people have lived there for four millennia, a fact proven conclusively by archaeological research. While the State of Israel was created only in 1948, other nations in the region are of recent origin as well. Saudi Arabia was formed in 1932; Lebanon became an independent nation in 1943, Syria and Jordan in 1946, Iraq in 1958, and Kuwait in 1961. Jews have populated Israel since the time of Abraham and have the strongest historic claim to the land.

Second, ***the Jewish people deserve a homeland.*** The Holocaust proved that anti-Semitism could destroy the Jewish race. Threats against their survival continue today in Iran and other jihadist regimes. The Jewish people need and deserve a land in which to live and a government to support and defend them.

Third, ***Israel is the only true democracy in the Middle East.*** Her neighbors are led by monarchs or dictators, or exist as proxies for foreign powers that control their governments. Israel, by contrast, is a genuine democracy. The Knesset, her parliament, is composed of 120 members from 17 parties. Every strata of Israeli society is represented in her governance.

As a democracy, Israel has voted with the United States in the United Nations more than England, Canada, France, Germany, or any other country in the world.¹⁷ She is our best friend in the region and one of our most strategic allies in the world.

Fourth, ***Israel is the most humanitarian nation in the region.*** Vice-president Hubert Humphrey once issued this credo: "The moral test of government is how that government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the aged; and those who are in the shadows of life—the sick, the needy and the handicapped."¹⁸

In the November 2012 conflict, Hamas imbedded offensive military weaponry within highly populated civilian areas, intending to provoke Israel's forces to unintentionally kill civilians. It uses human shields, in clear violation of the Geneva Convention.¹⁹ And it seeks the destruction of Israel. Many Palestinian children study maps of the Middle East on which the State of Israel does not appear.

By contrast, Israel seeks a two-state solution in which Palestinians would have their own nation. Israel supports women in leadership and freedom of speech for all its citizens, Jews and Arabs. It embraces immigrants from around the world and provides a generous health care and educational system. Few of its neighbors offer such services to their people.²⁰

Fifth, ***Israel has blessed the world.*** God promised Abraham that "all people on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:3). The Jewish people have blessed the world in a variety of ways.

At least 187 Jews have been awarded the Nobel Prize, accounting for 22 percent of all individual recipients worldwide and 36 percent of all U.S. recipients between 1901 and 2012. (Note that Jews make up 0.2 percent of the global population and two percent of the U.S. population.)

Consider some of the Jewish individuals whose contributions have changed history:

- Albert Einstein, physicist
- Jonas Salk, created first polio vaccine

- Albert Sabin, developed oral vaccine for polio
- Galileo, discovered the speed of light
- Gabriel Lipmann, discovered color photography
- Baruch Blumberg, discovered origin and spread of infectious diseases
- Briton Epstein, discovered first cancer virus
- Maria Meyer, discovered structure of atomic nuclei
- Julius Mayer, discovered laws of thermodynamics
- Sigmund Freud, father of psychotherapy
- Joseph Pulitzer, creator of "Pulitzer Prize" for achievements in journalism, literature, music and art.²¹

How different, and impoverished, would our world be without the Jewish people?

Sixth, ***Christians are indebted to Israel***. Christians are part of a family begun by Abraham and continued through the Jewish people across 40 centuries. As Paul noted, "the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings" (Romans 15:27). The Jewish people have given us the Old Testament, our Messiah, his apostles, and the foundations of our faith.

Seventh, ***God loves the Jewish people***. Our Father loves the world (John 3:16), whether Jew or Gentile. Even though the Jewish people rejected Jesus as their Messiah, the Lord has not rejected them. The Apostle Paul said, "Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles come in" (Rom. 11:25). This "hardening" is spiritual, that hardening of the arteries of the soul which comes from refusing the gospel.

Because the Jews rejected Christ, his followers turned to the Gentiles. His church took the gospel to the Gentile world. With this result: the "full number of the Gentiles," meaning the entire Gentile world, could "come in" to God's kingdom.

So God used the Jewish refusal of Christ, but Christ has not refused them. "And so all Israel will be saved," Paul continues (v. 26). "All Israel" here does not mean that every Jew will be saved apart from Christ—Paul spoke in Romans 9:2 of his "great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart" over the lostness of his Jewish nation. The apostle meant that the entire race of the Jews would have opportunity to come to salvation, just as the Gentiles now have that privilege.

How? Through the Gentiles, God offers salvation to the Jews. Paul said it this way: "I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them" (Rom. 11:13-14). The apostle hoped that the Jews would see the Gentiles coming to salvation, become jealous, and come to Christ as a result. Then God could fulfill his covenant to "take away their sins" (v. 27).

Here's the point: despite all they have endured, all the failures and slaveries and pain they have faced, "they are loved" (v. 28). Verse 29 promises that God's "gifts" (the word means his "grace") and call are "irrevocable"—he will never take them back or regret them. One day he hopes to "have mercy on them all" (v. 32).

Conclusion

God's word commands us to "pray for the peace of Jerusalem" (Psalm 122:6). Here is what we are to ask God to do for this people: "May those who love you be secure. May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels" (vs. 6-7). Have you prayed for the peace and security of Jerusalem and the Jewish people today?

Let's give the last word to Mark Twain. Writing for *Harper's* magazine in 1899, Twain observed:

If statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of stardust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly the Jews ought hardly to be heard of, but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his commercial importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk. His contributions to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine, and abstruse learning are also away out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers.

He has made a marvelous fight in this world, in all the ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself, and be excused for it. The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished.

The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?²²

¹Osama bin Laden, "Letter to America," November 24, 2002, *The Guardian* (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/nov/24/theobserver>, accessed 10 January 2013).

²For a much fuller discussion of this vital subject, see my *Radical Islam: What You Need to Know* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Elevation Press, 2011).

³<http://www.cfr.org/africa/egypts-muslim-brotherhood/p23991>, accessed 16 July 2011.

⁴Roger Cohen, "Israel's True Friends," *The New York Times*, January 7, 2013

(<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/08/opinion/israels-true-friends.html?src=me&ref=general>, accessed 9 January 2013).

⁵http://www.adl.org/main_International_Affairs/ahmadinejad_words.htm?Multi_page_sections=sHeading_1, accessed 16 July 2011.

⁶<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/26/world/africa/26iht-iran.html>, accessed 16 July 2011.

⁷http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/middle_east/jan-june06/iran_4-14.html, accessed 16 July 2011.

⁸Jonathan Lis, Nir Hasson and Jack Khoury, "Netanyahu at Holocaust Remembrance Day: Jewish people still face existential threat," *Haaretz*, April 18, 2012 (<http://www.haaretz.com/news/national/netanyahu-at-holocaust-remembrance-day-jewish-people-still-face-existential-threat-1.425134>, accessed 10 January 2013).

⁹http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/iran/nuclear_program/index.html, accessed 16 July 2011.

¹⁰Elliott Abrams, "Israel and Iran: The Grounds for an Israeli Attack," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2012 (<http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/israel-and-iran-grounds-israeli-attack>, accessed 10 January 2013).

¹¹Robert Wexler, "Israel and Iran: An Attack Might Be Necessary, but Not Yet," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2012 (<http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/israel-and-iran-grounds-israeli-attack>, accessed 10 January 2013).

¹²For a much larger discussion, see my *Life on the Brickpile: Approaches to Suffering from the Book of Revelation* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1997).

¹³Albert Barnes, *Revelation, Notes on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1884-5) 200-3.

¹⁴Malkie Janowski, "How Can I Find Out Which Hebrew Tribe I'm From?" *Chabad.org* (http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/679454/jewish/How-Can-I-Find-Out-Which-Hebrew-Tribe-Im-From.htm, accessed 10 January 2013).

¹⁵David Jeremiah, *I Never Thought I'd See the Day! Culture at the Crossroads* (New York: FaithWords, 2011) 254.

¹⁶John Adams, letter to F.A. Van der Kemp [February 16, 1808], *SimpleToRemember.com* (<http://www.simpletoremember.com/jewish/blog/john-adams-and-the-jews/>, accessed 10 January 2013).

¹⁷Sen. James M. Inhofe, "Seven Reasons to Support Israel, *Free Republic* (<http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/news/660883/posts>, accessed 10 January 2013); Michael Rubin, "Israel Votes with U.S. in UN More Than Any Other Country," *AEIdeas*, June 3, 2009 (<http://www.aei-ideas.org/2009/06/israel-votes-with-us-in-un-more-than-any-other-country/>, accessed 10 January 2013).

¹⁸Hubert H. Humphrey, 1977 speech, *Encyclopedia Britannica* (<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/276362/Hubert-H-Humphrey/276362suppinfo/Supplemental-Information>, accessed 10 January 2013).

¹⁹"International Humanitarian Law—Treaties & Documents" (<http://www.icrc.org/ihl.nsf/INTRO/380?OpenDocument>, accessed 10 January 2013).

²⁰For more, see Jonathan Miller, "Why My Fellow Liberals Should Support Israel in Her Conflict with Hamas," *Huffington Post*, November 20, 2012 (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jonathanmiller/why-my-fellow-liberals-sh_b_2165501.html, accessed 10 January 2013).

²¹Luana Goriss, "Jewish Contributions to Society," *About.com, Judaism* (<http://judaism.about.com/od/culture/a/contribution.htm>, accessed 10 January 2013).

²²Mark Twain, "Concerning the Jews," *Harper's Magazine*, September 1899 (http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Concerning_the_Jews, accessed 10 January 2013).